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THESIS

SOLDIER AS POLICEMAN IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA 1945-1946

JAMES C. POLLMAN

1992

91-14904



91-14904

SOLDIER AS POLICEMAN IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
1945 - 1946

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

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January 1992

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Maj Jill Whiskey Total Army Personnel
Command TAPC-OPB-D
Alex, VA 22332-0411
NWW 11/14/91

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ABSTRACT

After the Japanese surrendered in August 1945 most of Southeast Asia came under the control of the South East Asia Command (SEAC), commanded by Vice-Admiral the Earl Mountbatten of Burma. From that time until November 1946 SEAC attempted to perform its military mission of rescuing allied prisoners of war and returning the Japanese to Japan. It initially appeared to be a reasonably easy task, even though it would be new to everyone in SEAC. After the military mission was complete SEAC was to turn the areas over to the legitimate governments, pack their bags, and go home as the war was over. Up until the time that SEAC's troops started arriving at the various countries in Southeast Asia no one had given any serious thought about who were the legitimate governments; everyone assumed that the returning colonial powers would be welcomed with open arms and everything would return to the way it was before the war.

This study focuses on what happened when SEAC combat soldiers were forced to act as policemen in the areas of greatest strife: Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies. The basic issue is: when soldiers are forced to act as policemen, i.e. controlling mostly unarmed civilians, a whole host of additional political requirements arise. The failure of the European governments, especially Britain's, to fully realize this caused the soldiers of SEAC, from Mountbatten all the down to the lowest private, to make decisions that had serious political implications. It also calls for a serious change in a soldier's orientation; he is not just killing the enemy any more.

In order to clearly understand this situation it is also necessary to understand the sort of handicaps under which SEAC was working. The vacillating position of the United States, the critical shortage of shipping, the complete lack of knowledge, both geographically and politically, on most of the area, and some poor political decisions by the British government greatly constrained SEAC's activities.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In 1978 James C. Pollman graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in Saint Peter, Minnesota with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Upon graduating he joined the Peace Corps and served for three years in Malaysia as a Mathematics teacher. After returning from Malaysia he joined the Army and became a commissioned officer through the Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. He is a Captain in the United States Army and has served in a variety of assignments in Europe, the Continental United States, and Korea.

DEDICATION

To the Men and Women of the United States Army and
Professional Men of Arms everywhere

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis was made possible by the unselfish encouragement, guidance and supervision of professors David K. Wyatt and Anthony Kirsch. To both of them, I am very grateful. I am indebted for their valuable comments on the manuscript to clarify some of my basic concepts and theories. To Professor Wyatt and the many hours of editing, thank you. Thanks to the long list of scholars whom I listed in the bibliography, and their literature which served as the pedestal of this study. In particular I wish to single out Peter Dennis for his book; Troubled days of peace. I am grateful for the scholarship support from the Foreign Area Officers' Division, Department of Education, U.S. Army, Washington D.C. My special thanks and love to my wife, Mui Wah, whose support was essential to this undertaking. Lastly, I wish to thank Lord Mountbatten: his ability to see beyond the past and present and attempts to make this world a better place serves as a continuing inspiration to me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFNEI	Allied Forces Netherlands East Indies
ALFFIC	Allied Land Forces French Indo China
ALFSEA	Allied Land Forces South East Asia
CAB	Cabinet
COS	Chief of Staff
DO	Dominion Office
FO	Foreign Office
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
MECSAC	Middle East Centre, St. Antony's College
NEI	Netherlands East Indies
NICA	Netherlands Indies Civil Administration
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
RAPWI	Repatriation of Allied Prisoners of War and
Internees	
SEAC	Southeast Asia Command
SWPA	South West Pacific Area

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INTRODUCTION

"The war is over for the Allies, but not for us."¹

In this thesis I will examine the role of the military in Southeast Asia immediately after World War II; from August 1945 until November 1946. The South East Asia Command, SEAC, commanded by Vice-Admiral the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, was in charge of virtually all of South East Asia until relieved by civilian governments. Although officially SEAC was a combined allied command, in reality it was almost entirely British and Indian. Its headquarters was at Kandy, Ceylon at the end of the war, which meant that they had to quickly move it to Singapore in order to facilitate communications. At the time of the Japanese surrender SEAC had just defeated the Japanese in Burma and were planning the attack on Malaya. Very little work had been done on what SEAC would do when the war ended; they were planning for a long campaign to defeat the Japanese step by step. With the sudden Japanese capitulation SEAC was forced to face a great many problems, particularly political ones, which they had not anticipated. How they handled themselves and what went wrong provide clear lessons for similar problems in the future.

¹ From some staff officer in SEAC.

When Japan surrendered at the end of World War II the world became a very different place, especially in Southeast Asia. After centuries of colonization by the Europeans, the Japanese had shown the Europeans to be as vulnerable as anyone else. This, coupled with a lack of European power in the area immediately after war, gave the people of Southeast Asia the courage to try and claim their destiny for their own. The Europeans were not able to adjust to these new circumstances and were not about to give up their old territories without a fight. The men of the Southeast Asia Command were caught in the middle. It was impossible to please both sides, and in any case, they had a military mission of their own to accomplish.

This paper examines the short period of time from 15 August, 1945, when the Japanese announced their surrender, until SEAC's deactivation on 30 November, 1946. During this time the world not only made the transition from war to peace, but it also changed to a new world order. All the governments, though especially the United States and Britain, were slow to adjust, and they often were confused. It was the men on the spot who had to make the important decisions, usually with little guidance from higher authorities.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how SEAC carried out its mission of providing law and order in Southeast Asia immediately after the war. It is not my intention to provide an in-depth history of all the events that occurred, but rather to

demonstrate that many of the problems SEAC faced are common to the problem of providing law and order by the military. Under normal circumstances law and order is provided by police forces. In most of Southeast Asia in 1945 there was no police force: it was the soldiers of SEAC who were responsible. Since providing law and order is not what a soldier is trained to do, there were many problems. These problems were greatly complicated by having numerous governments involved as well as world wide attention thrust upon them.

I have divided the material in this paper into four areas. The first one concerns the external limitations that affected SEAC's ability to accomplish its mission. The United States was the major problem. The U.S. refused to issue a definite policy regarding the returning European colonial authorities. Since the US controlled the shipping and was the prime supplier of material they greatly affected SEAC. Shipping, in all aspects, was another problem for SEAC. SEAC could not control the deployment of French and Dutch forces from Europe to the East, thus they were saddled with the additional duties of carrying out civil administration directed by a foreign government until they were relieved by those governments. Meanwhile, within SEAC the shipping resources were grossly inadequate and continually caused them to change their plans. The last major external factor affecting SEAC was the British government's decision to reduce the tour of duty for SEAC soldiers. Not only did this

deprive SEAC of some of their most experienced soldiers, but it caused a further imbalance in the British-to-Indian composition of the troops and further tightened the shipping situation.

The second area examines how SEAC carried out its mission in French Indochina. For purposes of this paper only the Vietnamese territory south of the 16th parallel will be considered, as that was the only area of Indochina for which SEAC was responsible. This will highlight the problems of lack of definite guidance and shows what the soldiers had to contend with when dealing with a civilian revolt.

The third area examines the problems SEAC faced in trying to accomplish its mission in the Netherlands East Indies. I concern myself here with Java, since most of the problems occurred there. SEAC was greatly hamstrung by lack of guidance from London. Often they had to make decisions on the spot and worry about political repercussions later. There were also the problems of their frustration in facing an enemy that would not stand up and fight. At one point these frustrations were relieved in a distinctly unacceptable way.

The last area examines the differences between the police and the military. Only in extreme cases are the military given a law and order mission and this causes problems not only for the area assigned to the military, but for the military and politicians as well. Soldiers are trained to kill the enemy, not apprehend civilian criminals. Because providing law and order is a special

situation for the military, definite guidance must be provided to them. In particular, the military must be told the maximum amount of force they can use, approximately how long they will be in charge, who is responsible for giving them orders as to what type of law they are enforcing, and lastly, who is going to relieve them.

CHAPTER 1

MAJOR CONSTRAINTS ON SEAC

Any time the military is called in to perform a law and order type of mission there are serious problems. Often times the military is unprepared, or at least underprepared. SEAC suffered from shortcomings in almost all areas. In order to understand the great handicaps they were suffering under, as well as their successes and failures, I will examine the three major shortcomings that were beyond their control: vacillating United States policy, grossly inadequate shipping capabilities, and Operation Python. All three of these problems were political in nature and beyond SEAC's ability to influence despite SEAC's repeated attempts.

United States Policy

The United States was in the best position to influence events in Southeast Asia immediately after the war. They held control of allied shipping and they were sole provider of war materiel through the lend-lease program. Unfortunately not only did they not provide adequate leadership in this area, they created constant confusion and indirectly added to the chaos.

Historically the United States was very anticolonial. Being geographically, economically, and politically isolated from both the colonial powers and their colonies, the US could espouse its liberal doctrine of all men being created equal; life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; one man one vote; and it did not have to worry about any ramifications from those pious pronouncements. The policy paper prepared in the Department of State, 22 June, 1945, started; "... the traditional American belief in the right of all peoples to independence."¹ In most discussions of colonialism the Americans were quick to point out their policy on the Philippines, "the ideal Asian Policy." The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 gave the Philippines control of their internal administration and promised independence by 1946. This was held up as the example that all should follow.

At the beginning of the war there was a substantial number of Americans who thought that Britain had somehow tricked America into joining the war. A survey conducted by the United States Office of War Information concluded, "About 40 per cent of Americans think that the British got us into the war, and a slightly smaller percentage believe that the British will try to get us to do most of the fighting."² Winston Churchill, as the best-known Briton in America, did not always help to allay that

¹ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Vol VI, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965), p. 558.

² Christopher Thorne, Allies of a Kind (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 146.

feeling. His often-quoted remarks; "I have not become the King's First Minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire,"³ and after the attack on Pearl Harbor; "i have dreamed of, aimed at and worked for . . . American involvement"⁴ lent credence to the belief that America was fighting to save colonialism, not injustice.

Another of the moral issues that surfaced from throughout the war, and after it, was the Atlantic Charter, signed by Roosevelt and Churchill. The third article reads, "They respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live."⁵ There are several key points about the Charter. First, it was issued as a press release, not as a formal document. As the war progressed almost every leader on the Allied side either signed it, or at least agreed to it in principle, and it gained in importance with each signature. Second, it was signed on 14 August 1941, well before America entered the war and before the problems of the colonies in Southeast Asia had started. Churchill foresaw the problems that would arise if this press release was applied to areas outside of Europe. Despite Roosevelt's desire to end discriminatory practices in the postwar era, the British insisted on adding; "due respect for ... existing obligations." This was a catchall phrase that allowed the

³ New York Times, 11 November, 1942.

⁴ New York Times, 16 February, 1942.

⁵ New York Times, 15 August, 1941, p. 1

Europeans to claim that the Charter applied to them, but that application meant that they were to remain as colonizers. In early September Churchill further clarified it by declaring in the House of Commons, "At the Atlantic meeting, we had in mind, primarily, the restoration of the sovereignty, self-government, and national life of the States and Nations of Europe now under the Nazi yoke."⁶ Although the British, and the other colonial powers, would continue to maintain that line throughout the war and after, they had to continuously modify exactly what the Charter really meant.

President Roosevelt was never slow to point out the faults of colonialism, especially those of the French in Indochina. "France has had the country ... for nearly one hundred years and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning."⁷ He continuously held the position that France should not rule Indochina after the war. In a memorandum to Secretary of State Hull on 24 January 1945, Roosevelt again emphasized his belief: "...it [is] perfectly true that I [have], for over a year, expressed the opinion that Indochina should not go back to France"⁸ In general the issue of French colonialism was a major problem throughout the war and the French seldom helped their cause. The French were not invited to the Malta Conference. On his

⁶ Great Britain, Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 374, p. 67-69.

⁷ John J. Sbrega, Anglo-American Relations and Colonialism in East Asia (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1983), p. 98.

⁸ FRUS, 1944, vol III, p. 773.

way home from that conference, President Roosevelt stopped in Paris, but General de Gaulle refused to see him.

There was also considerable American mistrust towards the British. It was felt by some that they were pursuing a policy of having American blood spilled so that they could regain their colonies. An OSS report concluded, "It would appear that the strategy of the British, Dutch and French is to win back and control Southeast Asia, making the fullest possible use of American resources, but foreclosing the Americans from any voice in policy matters."⁹ Of the three colonial powers, the Dutch were the only ones who seemed to avoid most of the criticism. This was probably due more to a personal preference on President Roosevelt's part than anything else. The Dutch also helped blunt any criticism when Queen Wilhelmina promised future reforms for the Netherlands East Indies in a speech on 6 December, 1942. This speech offered nothing concrete, but it sounded good and played well in Washington.

Opposing the moralistic anticolonial component in America's foreign policy in Southeast Asia, were two pragmatic issues. First, near the end of the war, America was beginning to perceive the Soviet Union as its greatest postwar threat. Although nothing was said publicly, Washington's actions started showing a distinct questioning of Soviet intentions. Two examples of this

⁹ Donovan to FDR, 27, Oct. 1944, Roosevelt Papers, PSF box 167, as quoted in Thorne p. 594.

rethinking of American policy can be seen by the holding up of a \$10 million loan to the Soviet Union in April 1945¹⁰ and the fact that during the Potsdam conference the US told Britain about the atomic bomb, Truman even personally told Mountbatten, but it was kept a secret from the Russians. Throughout the administration a feeling was developing that only with a strong Europe could America keep the peace. The policy paper prepared by the Department of State on 22 June, 1945 states: "The United States Government may properly continue to state the political principle which has frequently announced, that dependent peoples should ... achieve an increased measure of self-government, but it should avoid any course of action which would seriously impair the unity of the major United Nations."¹¹ Independence for the colonies was fine as long as it was not going to be a communist independence. The second issue involved the Japanese-mandated islands; the Marianas, the Carolines, and the Marshalls. For strategic reasons the Departments of War and Navy were strongly in favor of keeping them under American control after the war.¹² The State Department, in response to the Yalta agreements concerning dependant territories, drafted several proposals for the United Nations. A compromise was worked out by which certain areas

¹⁰ FDR to WSC, 11 March and 6 April 1945, Roosevelt Papers, MR box 7; Woodward III, 515 as quoted in Thorne p. 499.

¹¹ FRUS, 1945, vol VI, p. 558.

¹² Thorne, p. 597.

were considered to be of such strategic importance that the Security Council, and not the General Assembly, would exercise authority over them. The conflict then arose as to how the US could claim that its interests in those islands were of great strategic value while the European interests in their former colonies were not. The proposal presented by the United States was written on the train enroute to the United Nations, yet another example of the lack of concern and planning by the United States for the postwar era.

American policy was contradictory. There was a conflict between its lofty moral standards and its pragmatic leanings. This problem continued to linger because, other than the Philippines, America had no dealings in Southeast Asia. The US was not threatened by any loss there and so there was no sense of urgency to motivate the development of a consistent and comprehensive policy. It was not until the pressure coming from the communist takeover of China in 1949 that American foreign policy regarding Southeast Asia would start to develop.

Eventually the US government attempted to skirt the issue by focusing entirely on the war. President Roosevelt told his new Secretary of State on New Year's Day, 1945; "I still do not want to get mixed up in any Indo-China decision. It is a matter for postwar."¹³ The ultimate expression of this indecisiveness

¹³ Sbrega, p. 112.

came in 1945, when France pushed hard to join the war against Japan. After many months of delay by President Roosevelt, President Truman attempted to side-step the issue by pushing the decision off to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They, in turn pushed it off to General MacArthur.¹⁴ Gen. MacArthur was well aware of the political implications and justified his decision strictly on the military merits of the situation. Although this was not the first time in history that a general made a political decision, it clearly demonstrated the lack of Washington's resolve concerning Southeast Asia.

Even after America had decided to accept the reestablishment of colonial rule in Southeast Asia, the US continued to muddle its way through and caused constant confusion. War equipment and shipping were still under United States control. The war had virtually destroyed Europe while the United States was never seriously threatened. Therefore, almost every piece of military hardware came from the United States. President Truman had tightened the criteria for lend-lease equipment by restricting it to "that which is to be used in the war against Japan, and not for any other purpose."¹⁵ The British, and especially the French and Dutch, were greatly affected by

¹⁴ "The President said that it is his policy to leave to the Commander-in-Chief in the field matters relating to the conduct of the war" as stated in a memorandum by the Director of the Office of European Affairs to the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee, May 23, 1945.

¹⁵ FRUS, 1945, vol VI, p. 456.

this decision. Already by October 1943 Britain was dependent on the United States for 100 per cent of its 10 ton trucks, 100 per cent of its transport aircraft, 88 per cent of its landing craft, and over 50 per cent of all heavy military hardware such as tanks and self-propelled howitzers.¹⁶ In the end, the United States had to modify its policy to accommodate the returning colonial powers.

If the lend-lease program had really been eliminated on 15 August 1945, it is very unlikely that the Dutch or French could have returned to their former colonies. As it was, their return was slow and sporadic because of directionless American policy. This indecisiveness on the part of the United States was confusing even to the people involved. At the end of August 1945, Max Bishop, Secretary of the American Commission at New Delhi, requested Washington's guidance on American policy toward the return of French rule in Indochina. The reply sums up the American position:

US has no thought of opposing the reestablishment of French control in Indochina and no official statement by US GOVT has questioned even by implication French sovereignty over Indochina. However, it is not the policy of this GOVT to assist the French to reestablish their control over Indochina by force and the willingness of the US to see French control reestablished assumes that

¹⁶ Thorn, p. 138.

French claim to have the support of the population of Indochina is borne out by future events.¹⁷

Shipping Constraints

Shipping was another major problem for SEAC. It was a two-headed snake: first, the external shipping needed to move the French and Dutch troops from Europe to Southeast Asia, and second, the internal shipping needed for mission accomplishment within the theater of operations. Both these issues troubled SEAC until its deactivation.

External shipping was mostly beyond SEAC's control. At the beginning of the war the allies pooled all their shipping resources. No one objected to this arrangement until Germany was defeated. At that time everyone, especially the Dutch, wanted their ships back. For the Europeans, the war against Germany was always the real war, while few followed events in Southeast Asia. Although Britain had colonies in Southeast Asia and had suffered defeats there, only thirty thousand British servicemen died in the war against Japan, as compared to two hundred and thirty-five thousand in the war against Germany. The United States, on the other hand, had always maintained that this was a global war. Until Japan was defeated the war continued. Further compounding the shipping issue were the

¹⁷ Telegram No. 657, dated August 30, 1945, from the Secretary of State to the American Mission at New Delhi; as quoted by Allan W. Cameron, Viet-Nam Crisis, a documentary History, vol I (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 51.

Americans returning home from Europe and the American shift of effort to the Far East. Since the only way to move French and Dutch troops to the Far East was to delay American movements, the Europeans had to wait. Hence the British would have to remain in place until properly relieved. This caused the British to take on additional responsibilities that they were not equipped to handle and did not plan for properly.

SEAC was equally hamstrung by internal shipping limitations. Shipping was needed for three primary purposes. First, it was needed to move British troops to the various areas to accomplish their mission. This, by itself, was no minor task, as the distance from west to east of SEAC's territory was the same as from Dublin to Moscow. Second, shipping was needed for movement of RAPWI and returning the Japanese to Japan. Third, there was a critical shortage of food and medicine throughout most of the region. Obviously, for humanitarian reasons, these sufferings had to be alleviated as quickly as possible. Additionally, the Europeans, especially the British, felt that they had been cheated out of a real victory over Japan by the atomic bomb, and so this humanitarian aid also helped demonstrate that the Europeans were still a powerful force.

SEAC had precious little shipping assets at the end of the war.¹⁸ There were fifty-two personnel ships with a trooping

¹⁸ For a detailed account of this see Rajendra Singh, Post-War Occupation Forces: Japan and South East Asia (New Dehli: Orient Longmans, 1958).

capacity of 95,000.¹⁹ Since many of the RAPWIs were in very poor condition, these ships could not be embarked at full trooping capacity. The following guidelines were used:

Cabins.....	100 per cent of normal
Standeers.....	70 per cent of normal
Troopdeck.....	50 to 60 per cent of normal

Figure 1. Trooping capacity for internal shipping.

[SOURCE: Rajendra Singh, *Post-War Occupation Forces: Japan and South East Asia*, (Orient Longmans, New Dehli, 1958) p. 183.]

Shipping assets from Japan and Southeast Asian countries also were not readily available. At the beginning of the war Japan had about six million tons of merchant shipping. Despite 3.3 million tons of construction and the capture by conquest of 800,000 tons, by August 1945 the country was down to 1.8 million tons, which was mostly small vessels.

Added to this crucial problem was the almost total lack of information about SEAC's area of responsibilities. On 24 July, 1945, at the Potsdam Conference, Mountbatten was told that his area of operations would now include the rest of the Netherlands East Indies and French Indochina south of the 16th parallel with an effective date of 15 August, 1945. There was very little time available for planning as three weeks after Mountbatten was informed, Japan announced its surrender. As an example of the

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 181.

problems faced by SEAC in this period, consider the differences between the planning figures about RAPWIs and their final totals:²⁰

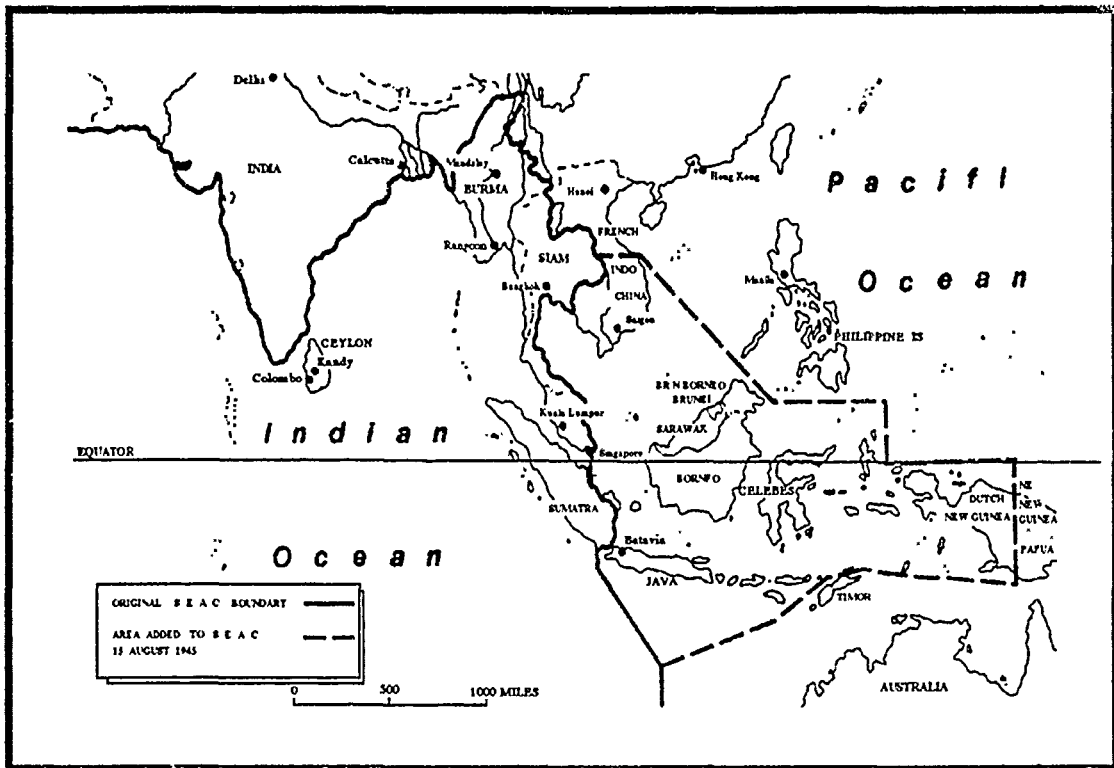
Table 1. Estimates and Actual totals of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees in SEAC's area of responsibility

Country	Estimated Prisoners	Estimated Internees	Estimated Total	Actual Total
Burma	1,100	102	1,202	*
Siam	28,639	171	28,810	*
Singapore Island	13,000	3,334	16,334	*
Malaya	3,940	...	3,940	*
French Indochina	6,150	35	6,185	*
Sumatra	7,700	1,700	9,400	21,000
Java	27,000	28,840	55,840	89,000
Total	87,529	34,182	121,711	206,575

* The exact number at these locations is unknown, but their figures are included in the total.

[SOURCE: compiled from: Vice-Admiral the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, Post-Surrender Tasks: Section E of the Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, Southeast Asia, 1943-1945 (London, 1969), p. 282, and Rajendra Singh, Post-War Occupation Forces: Japan and South East Asia (New Dehli: Orient Longmans, 1958) p. 173]

²⁰ Ibid., p. 174.



Map 1. Area added by Potsdam Conference to SEAC. [SOURCE: Peter Dennis, Troubled days of peace (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 18]

The prisoners and internees were scattered throughout the area, and at the time of surrender, there were 227 known camps. The shipping crisis worsened because each ship leaving for Europe with former prisoners of war never returned to the SEAC area. Added to the European total were 245,000 displaced Asian persons throughout the region. All of these persons were in great need of food, clothing, and medicine. At the bottom of the list of priorities, but by far the largest number of people to move, were the Japanese. In the end there were nearly three quarters

of a million Japanese troops, and support personnel, that needed to be repatriated to their homelands.

Despite the desire to accomplish their military mission as soon as possible (after all, the war was over and everyone wanted to go home), there were two additional shortcomings involving shipping that affected SEAC. First, with the exception of Siam and southern Vietnam, there was a shortage of food bordering on starvation.

Every effort was made to alleviate the problem, but allocating shipping for movement of food and other supplies slowed down the troop movements, and hence, mission accomplishment. As Mountbatten stated in his final report, "I was finding it necessary to make drastic cuts in planned movements in order to meet the shipping scarcity."²¹ Second, the shipping infrastructure was in shambles. There were no tugboats or buoys, and most of the harbors were so silted up that they could not be used until they were dredged, and most were mined. Not only were the facilities in great need of repair, but trained operators were in short supply. The situation facing SEAC in Singapore is typical:

²¹ Vice-Admiral the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, Post-Surrender Tasks: Section E of the Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, Southeast Asia, 1943-1945 (London, 1969), p. 285.

The peace-time organization for operating and managing the port was entirely absent; and in the early stages, repairs to port facilities had to be carried out entirely by military forces-while the port of Singapore itself was entirely operated by Service transportation units and personnel.²²

As a result, the great efforts by SEAC did not have a major impact on most of Southeast Asia, although, "actual starvation was prevented."²³

Operation Python

SEAC was further hampered by the actions of the British government. With the defeat of Germany and an election in Britain approaching, on June 6, 1945, the government announced that the tour of military duty in SEAC was shortened from four years to three years eight months, a policy called Operation Python. This meant the loss of 32,300 of the most experienced men in SEAC.²⁴ Furthermore, not only did the returning of these men complicate the already tight shipping situation, but it had a negative effect on the morale of those who had to stay and complete the mission. Mountbatten protested, "The officers and men who get home earlier ... will presumably be delighted, but the million odd men in the Navy, Army and Air

²² Ibid., p. 285.

²³ Ibid., p. 284.

²⁴ Philip Ziegler, Mountbatten: the Official Biography (London: William Collins Sons and Co. Ltd. , 1985), p. 298.

Forces ... who are now condemned to inactivity will moulder and rot."²⁵

SEAC's political problems were not confined only to the home front. Britain was stuck defending and supporting the French and the Dutch because of their common interest in colonial possessions. In the case of the French this was as much a result of the rebuff they were receiving from America as of a definite need on the part of the British. The British policy, as approved in February 1944, made two strong arguments for supporting the French in Indochina. First, a strong France was needed as a buffer against any future rearmed Germany -- "... a friendly and prosperous France is a strategic necessity to the Commonwealth and Empire as a whole ... To deprive France of her economic stake in Indochina would weaken her severely."²⁶ A second issue was that Indochina was a key to the security of the region. Since France would not be strong enough to properly defend it for some time after the war, Britain would help, and thus obtain some key port rights in the process. The Dutch also started moving towards the British as their protector, but were suspicious of British motives. The British worked hard to allay those fears; Churchill even commented to the Dutch Prime Minister, "that he was going to stand up for the Dutch Empire

²⁵ Ibid., p. 298.

²⁶ WP(44)111, CAB 66/47; Cab, 24 Feb. 1944 as quoted in Thorne, p. 466.

after the war."²⁷ The issues began having direct effect on SEAC after 15 August when the Japanese announced their surrender and the new territory was added to SEAC. SEAC was now completely responsible for all colonial areas in Southeast Asia, except Indochina north of the 16th parallel.

Timing caused a major problem. The decision to transfer the new area to SEAC was made at the Potsdam conference in July 1945, which was only eleven weeks after Germany had surrendered. Three weeks later Japan surrendered. The British government did not fully realize the political problems associated with the expanded territory²⁸, and even if they had, there was very little time to come to grips with them. In the end, events quickly overcame all plans and many political decisions were made by the men on the scene: the military. Political agreements were made post-facto with the French and Dutch.

Conclusion. SEAC never gave serious attention to what would happen after the war. Perhaps before SEAC had defeated the Japanese in Burma they might still have had doubts whether Japan could have been defeated, but certainly not after. This

²⁷ FO 371, files 41726 and 41627; WSC note, 11 Feb. 1944, PREM 3, 326, as quoted in Thorne, p. 460.

²⁸ That is not to say they left this topic unattended. Yet it was not until 10 October 1945 that Britain and France signed an agreement that fully accepted the return of France to Indochina - over a month after the British started occupying it. The Dutch had signed an agreement with the American command over the re-installation of Dutch civil administration in the conquered areas, but a similar arrangement with SEAC had to be worked out in a hurry when Japan surrendered.

lack of planning was especially detrimental as most of the problems they faced were political in nature. The vacillating American policy on the return of European colonial control affected not only any possible support from the US, but also their control of shipping assets had a direct impact on SEAC's mission. All of this was well known, but no planning was done on how this could affect SEAC. Internal shipping capabilities were abysmally inadequate for the task at hand. It is astonishing that SEAC was able to accomplish anything at all with what was at hand. The only saving grace for SEAC was that by the end of the war the more responsible positions were filled by the more talented personnel who had had at least three years of experience. If the same situation had occurred when SEAC had first been activated the outcome would have been a disaster. Lastly, the allied composition of SEAC was anemic at best. This continued until SEAC's deactivation and forced SEAC to make international political decisions, often without knowledge of the other parties involved.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

As stated earlier, SEAC was given control of most of Southeast Asia the day Japan announced its surrender. It faced problems on a scale that had never been encountered before: an ill-defined mission, poor communications, little or no information on the areas it was in charge of, and political pressures of a global scale. Overall they did a fairly good job. Hindsight, of course, shows us all sorts of alternatives that probably would have worked better, but the record shows that the men in charge tried to make the best choices, and usually succeeded.

The plan originally was for SEAC to conquer Southeast Asia piecemeal. When the Japanese suddenly announced their surrender, not only did the mission change immediately from conquest to occupation, but, on the same day, SEAC's boundaries expanded. Although the mission changed, SEAC received almost no guidance. Admiral Mountbatten instructed his staff on what he viewed as the priorities. The following is the list of tasks assigned to the commands:

- a. Disarm and concentrate all Japanese forces;
- b. Protect, succor and subsequently evacuate Allied prisoners of war.
- c. Establish and maintain law and order.
- d. Introduce food and other civil supplies.
- e. Set up the appropriate civil administration in accordance with the wishes of the people, if possible, but consistently with the honour and dignity of the United Nations, everywhere without exception.¹

What is essential to this discussion are points c and e. It is important to realize that both of these were considered top priorities even before any occupation had started. It is equally important that these two tasks were stated in such general terms. Point e is particularly interesting, as the phrase "in accordance with the wishes of the people" does not tell which "people" it is referring to: the colonialists or the indigenous peoples, or perhaps both. This ambiguity may well have reflected the political guidance London was sending SEAC at the time. As events unfolded, the lack of a clear cut decision caused undue chaos, unnecessary suffering, and allowed certain persons/countries to take advantage of the situation.

Three aspects of point c, "establish and maintain law and order," need to be considered. First, why was it listed to begin with; second, what assumptions were made about it; and third, how and why was it modified later? I will consider these three

¹ Singh, p. 171.

areas and then examine how they applied to French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies.

The most likely reason that law and order was mentioned was not because of the likelihood of civilian revolt but because of the uncertainty of the Japanese response. Although Japan announced its surrender on 15 August, the official surrender did not take place until 2 September. General MacArthur, backed by the Combined Chiefs of Staff, ordered that no one enter any Japanese-occupied territories until the official surrender took place. It was feared that until enough time had been given to ensure that all the Japanese had been informed, there could be unnecessary chaos and possibly violence. This was particularly important as the Japanese communications were erratic at best. Mountbatten noted in his official report that "on the 23rd August I received a signal from General Kimura to the effect that he had passed cease-fire orders to all units with which he could get in touch but: there may be some units ... whose position still remains unknown."² There was good reason to believe this would be the case. On 20 August, Lieutenant General Stopford was still fighting the Japanese in southern Burma: "in some areas the local Japanese commanders were showing no signs of surrendering and there was a risk that isolated enemy units might

² Vice-Admiral the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Allied Commander South East Asia, 1943-1945 (New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1951), p. 182.

continue to fight, even after surrender orders from their headquarters had reached them."³ Since there was virtually no information on the rest of Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia, the Commanders in SEAC had to assume that the events in southern Burma would be repeated elsewhere.

It was immediately clear that not only were SEAC's forces prevented from occupying any of its new territories by military orders, but even if it were allowed to do so, it was logistically impossible. In an effort to try to force the Japanese to cooperate and prevent chaos from erupting, Mountbatten contacted Field Marshal Count Terauchi, commander of all Japanese troops in Southeast Asia, and ordered him to use his forces to maintain law and order.⁴ Given SEAC's chronic shortage of transportation and hence its limitations on occupying Southeast Asia, Mountbatten decided that it was essential to use the Japanese chain of command. It had already been stated in the official surrender ceremony at Tokyo Bay that "... all ... officials [are] to remain at their posts and continue to perform their non-combatant duties unless specifically relieved."⁵ Mountbatten wanted to ensure that this policy was enforced. He states:

³ Ibid., p. 182.

⁴ Ibid., p. 185. and p. 282. The order was conveyed to Terauchi before 3 September. It held Terauchi personally responsible for any violence.

⁵ Article (v) of the Article of Surrender, signed on 2 September, 1945, on board the U.S.S. Missouri.

I consider that if the Japanese Chain of Command had been disrupted ... that it might provide the enemy Commanders with a means of controlling their forces in resisting us - before we had fully replaced it with our own.⁶

At the time of the official Japanese surrender to SEAC on 12 September in Singapore it was fairly clear that the Japanese would cooperate. There were, however, disturbing reports from various locations that some Japanese units were failing to adhere to the terms of surrender and allowing, and perhaps aiding, outbreaks of chaos. In an effort to address this issue, as well as to emphasize the power of the returning European colonial regimes to the indigenous peoples, Mountbatten, in his Japanese surrender speech stated, "The Japanese are surrendering to a superior force."⁷ The memory of the lightning European defeat three years earlier, however, could not be so glibly erased.

So the rationale for ordering his troops to maintain law and order came, at least, in part, from the fear that the Japanese would cause trouble, and/or continue to fight. A second part came from a dawning realization that the local inhabitants of SEAC's area might not accept the returning colonial powers with open arms. In Burma, a country already liberated, there was a very strong nationalist movement. With the four to six weeks delay between Japan's announcing its surrender and the landing

⁶ Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 282.

⁷ Ibid., p. 233.

of SEAC occupation forces in Southeast Asia, it could only be assumed that they would meet with some resistance. In March 1945 the Japanese had overthrown the French Vichy government in Indochina and set up a quasi-independent government, and on 15 August Indonesia declared itself an independent republic. The extent to which these independence movements had gone was almost totally unknown to SEAC, but I am sure SEAC kept an eye on them after their experiences in Burma.

Adding to the likelihood of resistance was the amount of weapons in the region. Before the war there were very few weapons available to the local inhabitants. Usually they were given to police forces, and at times to members of a small local army. The colonial rulers kept a tight rein on who was authorized to own a weapon. During the war both the Japanese and the Allies handed out weapons. When the Japanese realized that Southeast Asia would be invaded by the Allies they started training and arming the local inhabitants. It was felt that the Japanese would have a better chance of surviving the war if the Allies had to fight their way not only against the Japanese, but against the inhabitants of independent Southeast Asian nations as well. The Allies also supplied arms, but sent them to the resistance movements. Force 136 operated throughout most of northern Southeast Asia and aided almost all anti-Japanese forces, including the communists. The Americans and Chinese

also supplied arms to anti-Japanese forces. A third source of weapons was the Japanese army immediately after the war. In many cases local Japanese commanders surrendered to the local inhabitants, giving them all of their weapons. The Japanese had also stockpiled a great deal of war materiel throughout the region. As a result, when SEAC forces started occupying Southeast Asia, there was a substantial portion of the people who possessed arms, and many who had had some sort of military training.

The second issue concerning establishing and maintaining law and order was: Whose law and order are we talking about? Initially, most of Southeast Asia remained under Japanese martial law. This period lasted anywhere from four to six weeks-all the way to April 1946 in some areas. How well the Japanese carried out this order depended entirely on where they were and who their commander was.

The problem became significantly more confusing once the British arrived. The vast majority of troops that SEAC used were Indians led by British officers. In fact, there was only one all-British division in the region, and it was stationed in India and Burma. There was an even a higher ratio of Indian troops in the British Indian Army than usual, as Operation Python had already removed over thirty thousand Britons. With the exception of Malaya and Singapore, these troops were going to areas that were not former British possessions. There was no awareness

of what they would encounter and certainly no cultural awareness training. The situation was ripe for disaster: Indian troops trying to enforce British law and order in colonies formerly run by the French and the Dutch which were now governed, at least to some extent, by local governments. To show how extreme the situation was, on 1 October, 1945, in the Regular Indian Army there were 51,642 British officers, 59,543 Indian Officers, and 1,357,878 Indian Other Ranks.⁸ Language, the cultures of both the former colonists and the indigenous peoples, and disparate motives for their actions all combined to almost totally prevent SEAC from accomplishing its missions.

Another component compounding this issue was that the Indians, who were from a dependant country, were involved with reasserting colonial rule in other countries at the same time as their compatriots were trying to win independence from British colonial rule. There was a great deal of political ramification back in India about this. Mountbatten's chief intelligence officer, David Wehl, estimated when SEAC began this mission that they had about seven months to complete it before irresistible political pressures would compel the withdrawal of the Indian troops.⁹ Although pressures continued to mount throughout this period,

⁸ Bisheshwar Prasad, Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939-45, Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organisation (Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, India and Pakistan, 1956), p. 469.

⁹ David Wehl, Birth of Indonesia (London, 1948), p. 45.

they were not as drastic as they might have been. The leaders of the Indian National Army went on trial during this period.

Although the nationalist INA was very popular with most Indians, the Congress Party backed the British. They made this decision primarily because they feared that if they did not, a major rift would occur in the Indian military which might take a generation to mend.

The final element in this issue of whose law and order it was, is the status and governing abilities of the newly formed indigenous governments. Both in French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies popular local governments had proclaimed their country's independence from colonial rule. They exerted some control over their respective countries, but certainly did not have complete control. Given the distances involved, and the logistical limitations, SEAC was not in a position to subdue the entire region. As an alternative, if SEAC started using the local governments to control their countries, SEAC would then be involved in supporting those governments. This was a political decision, and one in which the speed of events in Southeast Asia was not appreciated by the governments of Europe.

The problem becomes even messier, as the local governments could not completely control their own people. They continuously played for time so that they could further establish their base in their country. The French and the Dutch were also playing for time. When Japan surrendered, neither had

many troops available in SEAC's command.¹⁰ Shipping constraints would prevent any European troops from deploying to Southeast Asia in force until the early part of 1946. The longer the Europeans could stall SEAC from accomplishing its mission the stronger they became. Hence SEAC's desire to finish the job and leave was thwarted by all the parties concerned. Because America had no colonial interests, or much toleration for those who did, the US stayed neutral during this period and gave plenty of advice, but gave help only grudgingly.

The third issue involving establishing and maintaining law and order is: How and why was it modified later? At this point it should be clear that what was initially considered a relatively minor straightforward aspect of the mission would become a major obstacle to the completion of that mission. The assumptions by the SEAC command that the local people would be overjoyed at being liberated from the Japanese, or at least would not oppose them, would quickly be proven wrong. There was an almost immediate need to modify parts of the mission in order to accomplish the main parts. Communications were extremely limited, erratic, and frustrating. Not only did this mean that the man on the spot needed to make the decisions, often with political import, but also, the journalist often had a much faster communications network. At times SEAC command

¹⁰ The French only had the 5RIC in Ceylon, with a strength of 979 and the Dutch had virtually no troops available.

would read about a major development in its area before it had received any word of it from their own people on the spot.

Conclusion. SEAC initially realized that law and order would be one of their top priorities. This was based on a fear of Japanese units continuing to fight. Within weeks after the surrender it became clear that the Japanese would cooperate, for the most part, and that the indigenous peoples were not going to welcome the Europeans back with open arms. The purpose of imposing law and order then changed, but unfortunately, it was never clearly nor comprehensively stated. The issue of law and order was also muddled because no one realized the social and cultural issues involved: a British military command using Indian troops to enforce law and order in areas where the French and Dutch had imposed their systems on local South East Asian societies. Added to this was the problems of using Indians, who were actively trying to gain independence from Britain, to reestablish colonial control in other Asian lands.

French Indo-China

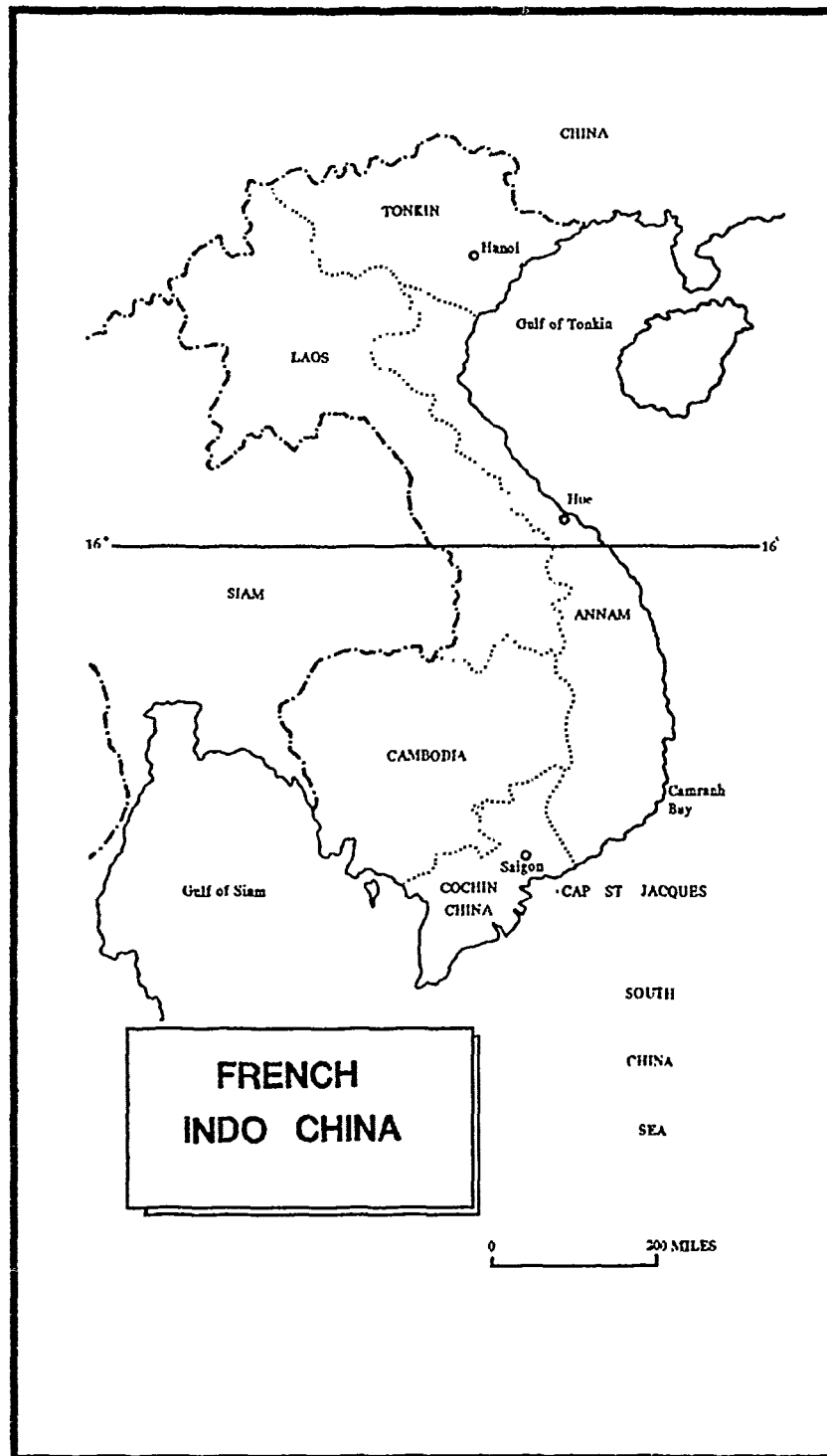
Initially French Indochina presented the greatest challenge to SEAC. There were problems involving, first, the way the Vichy French had collaborated with the Japanese during the war; second, the division of Indochina between two military commands; the British and the Chinese; third, the lack of French troops available to take over from the British; and, lastly, the mission as given to SEAC, and how it was later modified. Mountbatten's leadership and guidance was the only bright spot in an otherwise foggy operation.

When the Germans defeated France at the beginning of World War II the status of French Indochina was in question. Since the Vichy French were now collaborating with the Germans, and since Germany and Japan were allies, French Indochina should have been supportive of the Japanese cause. This, in fact happened, albeit in a some what roundabout way.¹ The Japanese considered the control of Indochina as the key to their expansion into Southeast Asia as well as a way of preventing any western aid reaching China. It was critical to their plans that Indochina be controlled, and not conquered, as they could not afford the manpower or time for such an operation. In the end, they got exactly what they wanted: unlimited use of all of Indochina with the French still in charge of

¹ Jan Pluvier, South-East Asia from Colonialism to Independence (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 109.

domestic law and order. One curious situation arose during this time: the United States was the only country that fought against the Axis powers that recognized the Vichy French government in Indochina. Surprisingly, this issue was never raised after the war.

It was clearly evident to all people in Indochina that the French, from a position of weakness, were supporting the Japanese. This entailed two major blows against French prestige. First, the white man was publicly seen bowing to an Asian. The French lost their shield of invincibility. Even worse, they had lost it without a fight. This gross embarrassment would not be forgotten, either by the people of Indochina or by the French when they returned after the war. Second, as the Vichy French were fully collaborating with the Japanese, whatever hatred the people developed towards the Japanese was also directed towards the French. When over half a million Vietnamese died of starvation during the last half of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, the people blamed the French as well as the Japanese. In this situation the French could not return after the war as liberating heroes. Not only had their armor been pierced, but it had become every bit as tarnished as that of their opponents. The French could never use the term "protectorate" again to describe their involvement in Indochina. The people of Indochina welcomed the British when



Map 2. Indochina showing the 16th parallel. [SOURCE: Peter Dennis, Troubled days of peace (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 18]

they arrived after the surrender of Japan; however, as the British policy of reinstating French rule began to unfold, the hatred towards the French was also directed towards the British. Soldiers do not receive training on how to handle hatred and act of violence directed towards them by civilians.

The status of Indochina was cloudy throughout the war. Initially the Chinese were responsible. When SEAC was activated Mountbatten immediately met with Chiang Kai-shek and worked out a gentleman's agreement. Since neither commander was anywhere near to being able to operate in Indochina at the time, they agreed to leave it open to both. Anyone who had the ability could conduct operations there. Towards the end of the war the United States became involved as they were in the best position to reconquer it, if they so desired. The situation then became very muddled as the Americans were flying missions over Indochina, the Chinese were supplying anti-Japanese forces, and the British and French were conducting special forces intelligence missions. Finally, at the Potsdam conference, it was decided that Indochina should be divided, by the 16th parallel, between China and Britain.

The biggest headache facing SEAC in Indochina was the lack of French troops. It was not until 19 July, 1945 that the Combined Chiefs of Staff finally accepted the French offer to

fight in the Far East.² The French were happy with the decision, but there were so many conditions and restrictions placed on it, especially shipping and supplies, that it was almost worthless. As a result, SEAC would be caught in a situation in which they would have to assume all of France's responsibilities until the French showed up in sufficient strength to take over. This meant that the man on the ground, Major General Douglas Gracey, had to make many decisions that were administrative and political in nature, and often these were decisions affecting the French government and not the British.

The 20th Indian Division was chosen to perform the postwar duties in Indochina. Major General Gracey was the commander and was overall in charge of the area. Gracey's chain of command was an abortion of efficiency and responsibility. As commander of the 20th Division, he took orders from General Slim, who was Commander of Allied Land Forces in Southeast Asia. As head of the Control Commission he took orders from Mountbatten. Since the French were responsible for all civil affairs, but there were no French forces available, Gracey had to accept advice from the French on what needed to be done. The French, however, were part of SEAC, and as such, were subordinate to Gracey in his role as Commander of Allied Land Forces in French Indochina. Given the lack of communications

² Peter Dennis, Troubled days of peace (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 32.

available to SEAC, as well as the confusion throughout the world immediately following the end of the war, Gracey was left to handle the situation as he saw fit.

Shortly before Gracey flew to Saigon the Combined Chiefs of Staff sent a message to Mountbatten further restricting SEAC's responsibility in Indochina. It stated; SEAC is "not to occupy more of French Indochina than is necessary to ensure the control of the headquarters of the Japanese Southern Armies."³ Peter Dennis argues that Gracey probably did not receive this new order before he left.⁴ Given his actions in Indochina it is hard to believe that he did.

The problems started long before Gracey arrived. On March 9, 1945 the Japanese struck. In a lightning move they took over all key administrative areas and then quickly arrested and interned all the French. Within half a day the colonial rule of the French was swept away. Two days later the Japanese announced that they were granting Vietnam independence. The puppet government that was installed was pro-Japanese, and basically nothing changed in the way the country was run, but the damage to French authority was done. Even if independence was in name only, the Vietnamese knew that when the Japanese were defeated they would never go back to colonial rule. After the Japanese announced their surrender on 15 August, events

³ Ibid., p. 35.

⁴ Dennis, p. 40

happened very quickly. On 23 August the Viet Minh forced Emperor Bao Dai to abdicate, and one week later Vietnam proclaimed itself an independent republic.

The French response was too little and too late. On 24 March they had offered a new proposal for limited autonomy for their colonies after the war. It fell far short of independence. Additionally, the French had no military presence in the Far East to enforce any proclamation. The Commander of French Forces in the Far East, General Leclerc, did not arrive at SEAC headquarters until 22 August, 1945. The French High Commissioner, Vice Admiral d'Argenlieu, would not arrive in theater until the middle of September. Even more astonishingly, neither men would go to Indochina until ordered to do so by de Gaulle in mid October.⁵

On 2 September a riot broke out in Saigon. Although not very well documented, the causes were clear, and they would remain long after the SEAC handed the area over to the French. French soldiers and civilians interned by the Japanese had freed themselves shortly after Japan announced its surrender. They were resentful towards the Vietnamese for having been imprisoned and were in no mood to take orders from them. Gracey would later describe their actions as "unnecessarily

⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

provocative and undisciplined."⁶ Added to this was the chaotic political conditions in the south. The Viet Minh had barely been able to set up a government in Saigon. There were many factions that opposed them and acted on their own. Many of these groups, in an effort to make a big impression on the local populace and/or, embarrass the Viet Minh, tried to be more anti-French than anyone else. It is not difficult to see how the hatred of the French and Vietnamese would quickly feed upon each other and erupt in violence.

The first British troops flew into Saigon on 11 September. General Gracey arrived on 13 September. Gracey found no one in control. Law and order was strictly a local phenomenon. At the airport he was met by a delegation from the Viet Minh, but he refused to have anything to do with them both because his first concern was with concluding the war with Japan, and second, because he had strict orders that only French authority was to be recognized. The spotty enforcement of law and order by the Japanese caused Gracey to once again inform Terauchi that the Japanese had been ordered to remain at their posts until relieved by the Allies. Continued poor performance by the Japanese forced Gracey to consider alternatives.

Gracey arrived in Saigon with no political advisor and no real information on the situation. He had come to perform a military

⁶ Gracey to Mountbatten, SGN 99, 25 September 1945: WO 203/4271 as quoted in Dennis p. 49

mission and had no desire to get involved in any internal affairs. After he arrived, the only information he could get came primarily from former French prisoners of war. Their thoroughly biased intelligence would lead Gracey to conclude that the government of the Viet Minh was responsible for the violence. Because the biggest fear was still the possible continuance of the war by the Japanese, Mountbatten resolved to continue liaison with the old clandestine organizations. In particular, their primary mission was "to provide local intelligence particularly about the actions taken by the Japanese, to comply or otherwise, with surrender orders."⁷

The violence on both sides continued. Gracey decided that it hindered his mission and had to be stopped. Despite the fact that the 80th Brigade would not be fully established until 26 September, on 19 September Gracey sent Brigadier Mausell, his Control Commission Chief of Staff, to the Viet Minh's provisional government with a proclamation which stated that, in two days, he would close all newspapers, ban all demonstrations, processions and public meetings, and prohibit the carrying of weapons. What is important to this discussion is that Gracey emphasized that his authority came from Mountbatten and that it covered all of Indochina south of the 16th parallel. This, despite the fact that his original orders from ALFSEA had limited him to

⁷ Singh, p. 196.

"the Saigon area" and the later order from the Combined Chiefs of Staff to "only the headquarters of the Japanese Southern Army." Gracey had clearly overstepped his authority by claiming all of SEAC's portion of Indochina. In addition, he had nowhere near enough military strength to enforce it. However, it must be taken into account that Gracey was a combat officer, with virtually no political experience, and more importantly, he was the man on the spot and felt it necessary to do something to improve the situation. General Slim, Gracey's commander, was at Saigon on the day the proclamation was handed to the provisional government and he apparently had no trouble with it.⁸

Mountbatten realized immediately that Gracey had exceeded his military role and had produced a political document. Mountbatten notified the Chiefs of Staff and outlined two possible courses of action and requested a policy ruling.⁹ The first option involved implementing Gracey's proclamation as stated; assuming full civil and administrative responsibilities for all of Indochina within SEAC's jurisdiction. This would require at least a division of British troops which would not be relieved until the French had sufficient men in Indochina. The second option restricted Gracey to Saigon and turned all other areas over to the

⁸ Dennis, p40, Dennis goes on to say that Slim related the situation to Leclerc when Slim returned to Kandy. According to Slim, the only 'black spot' was the vehemently anti-Vietnamese attitude of the local French population.

⁹ Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 288.

French. Mountbatten urged acceptance of the latter. He felt that the first was simply beyond SEAC's abilities, but judged it "dangerous" to revoke the proclamation altogether.

Gracey's proclamation was intended to clamp down on the violence in Saigon. The Japanese were not performing their duties adequately and the Viet Minh were not able to quell the disturbances. On 21 September British Indian troops started disarming Viet Minh police and took control of the police stations and jails. Gracey obviously felt that these actions were not enough to fully establish order and so, on 23 September, in coordination with the French forces in Saigon, a coup d'etat was carried out. Although the coup was very successful with minimum loss of life, the Vietnamese were in no mood to accept the situation. On the following day they made determined attacks on the power station, water works, and other public facilities. Bitter fighting continued for over a week with the worst occurring on the 24th when about 150 French were killed and about as many were kidnapped in the Cite Heyraud district of Saigon.¹⁰ The British were able to restore a certain measure of order, but the price was high; several riots were brought under control with at least 60 Vietnamese killed.¹¹

This coup was the decisive action for SEAC in Indochina. It committed the British to a much larger role and showed them to

¹⁰ Dennis, p. 49.

¹¹ Dennis, p. 50.

be fully supporting the French. It was executed while Mountbatten was waiting for a reply from the Chiefs of Staff; another example of the events in the Far East occurring faster than the politicians in Europe could respond. The most important issue was law and order. Gracey saw it as imposing European law and order so that the French could be reinstalled as colonial rulers. There was a chance that a real calm could have been achieved if the French had also been held to the same standards as the Vietnamese. Their gross abuse of the civil liberties of the Vietnamese directly led to the revolt that followed. The coup restored the administration of Saigon to the French, but it did not establish law and order.

Due to the deteriorating situation, and the possibility that it would quickly become worse, Mountbatten called a meeting on 28 September. Not only were Gracey and Leclerc present, but the British Secretary for War was also there. Mountbatten told the French and Gracey that "I consider it vitally important that negotiations between the French and the Annamites should start as soon as possible."¹² Both Mountbatten and Slim argued that the French should follow the example of the British in Burma where a similar situation had been defused by negotiations and promises of Dominion status. At this meeting, the Secretary of War made it clear that it was the policy of His Majesty's

¹² Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 287.

Government not to interfere in the internal affairs of French Indochina. Apparently no one felt that there was any contradiction between Britain declaring itself neutral in regards to internal affairs and Mountbatten forcing the French to negotiate. On October 1, the confusion was multiplied by a telegram Mountbatten received from the Chiefs of Staff. It altered his instructions to use British and Indians troops to give assistance to the French throughout the interior of Southern Indochina as long as this did not prejudice the primary responsibility in Saigon.¹³ Clearly the leadership at SEAC was getting whip sawed back and forth. Mountbatten accepted the orders from higher authorities, but used his judgement as to what the final goal should be and how best to achieve it. The politicians in Europe were not in touch with the events in Indochina and simply could not react fast enough to give meaningful guidance.

The soldiers on the ground had an equally difficult time. Their greatest fear initially was the Japanese. These units had been fighting them for over three years and had developed a great mistrust of them. The continued fighting in Burma after the announced surrender was seen as a likely common occurrence. The Commander of the 14/13 Frontier Force Rifles told his troops, "We may still have to use force of arms to clear these

¹³ Ibid., p. 288.

countries of the Jap."¹⁴ They were warned that they would be involved in an operation that would not necessarily be peaceful and that they should take all war precautions.

The resistance they met was from the Vietnamese, not the Japanese. It was sporadic and often not very well organized. They were not fighting an army, but trying to control violent political outbursts that sometimes took the form of mass demonstrations, armed bands, and individual armed assaults. This army was not mentally prepared to be rejected by the very people they had come to liberate.

The worst of the fighting occurred during the first two weeks in October. It was heavy fighting with clearly discernable forces on the other side. The last real battle occurred on 16 October when a "crowd of four hundred men armed with rifles, spears, bows and poisoned arrows and even a mild type of tear gas tried to capture a bridge."¹⁵ After they failed, the Vietnamese started guerilla warfare. Convoys would be ambushed, but the objective of the patrol would be free from resistance. Grenades were thrown at guards, and in one particularly bloody incident, at some soldiers playing soccer, killing ten.

¹⁴ War Diary, 14/13 Frontier Forces Rifles, 15 August 1945 as quoted in Singh, p. 199.

¹⁵ Singh, p. 203.

Without a clearly defined enemy to fight against, the soldiers were acting in the policeman's role. Their frustration was evident. Orders were revised to suit the situation as the military men saw it. Before a major offensive action in December, MG Gracey added the following paragraph to the order:

The difficulty is to select him [the enemy] as immediately he has had his shot or thrown his grenade he pretends to be friendly. It is therefore perfectly legitimate to look upon all locals anywhere near where a shot has been fired as enemies, and treacherous ones at that, and treat them accordingly. Similarly, if, when following up a report, no enemy are met with suspects must be brought in from the area concerned. They are probably the hostiles reported, who have for the moment become friendly villagers.¹⁶

The frustration had even reached the highest level in the country. Gracey was in no mood to tolerate unnecessary casualties and did not want his men put at a disadvantage. The soldier's mentality of viewing everything as either friendly or foe is explicitly stated. As far as the soldier on the ground is concerned, one Vietnamese is the same as any other Vietnamese: there is no way for him to tell a legitimately friendly villager from an enemy that is feigning friendship. In January even the pretext that the soldiers could determine the difference was removed when they were ordered to "arrest every male."¹⁷

¹⁶ War Diary, the 20th Indian Division, 11 Dec 1945, as quoted in Singh, p. 211.

¹⁷ Singh, p. 213.

Another issue was finding the weapons being used against the British. House searches rarely produced any arms caches, so a policy was started by which suspected houses were burned. Gracey was well aware of the policy and even defended it as operationally necessary. The soldiers were responding in a military fashion to what is essentially a police function: searching for weapons.

The violence against British troops convinced Gracey that the Viet Minh either could not, or would not, control their subordinates. His only alternative was to turn the offenders over to the French courts, but they were overloaded. He asked permission from Mountbatten to utilize British military courts, where, in flagrant cases, the subordinate commanders would be authorized to "bump them off."¹⁸ He considered this extreme measure "most essential for the morale of our own troops and of the French." Mountbatten refused to give Gracey permission as "War crimes can only be committed by those engaged in the prosecution of war." To institute Gracey's proposal would require the British to impose British Military Administration, which would depart dramatically from the official British position of noninvolvement in the internal affairs of Indochina.

In the end, the British military acted like the soldiers they were trained to be: "always use the maximum force available to

¹⁸ Gracey to Slim, 13 October 1945, as quoted in Dennis p. 168

ensure wiping out any hostiles we may meet."¹⁹ Gracey had asked Mountbatten for permission to use greater military might against the Viet Minh, which Mountbatten had approved so long as Gracey informed the civilians by radio and leaflet drop beforehand. Gracey immediately ordered the use of air strikes when it was deemed necessary to avoid British casualties. Mountbatten quickly clamped down on using air strikes, requiring that they be used "only as an emergency measure and to the minimum extent."²⁰ In December he issued a strongly worded order forbidding them completely.

The issue I have examined here is: How did the British military handle the policeman's role of establishing law and order? The final question to ask is: Did Gracey try to establish it in order to fulfill his primary military mission or was it established pending the arrival of the French forces? I conclude that it was the latter, but that Gracey was following the orders given to him. The political situation was cloudy and orders coming from Britain seldom helped to clarify what Gracey was suppose to do. The easiest way to answer the question is to ask: Who was supposed to relieve Gracey? If you are going to establish law and order and eventually leave, you will have to hand it over to someone. Since there was never any question that Indochina would be

¹⁹ War Diary, the 100 Indian Infantry Brigade, 27 October, 1945, Operation Instructin No. 220, as quoted in Singh, p. 199.

²⁰ Mountbatten to Slim, 15 November 1945, WO 172/1791 as quoted in Dennis p. 175

handed over to the French, Gracey's handling of the situation is clear and understandable. The two mitigating circumstances were the relatively early arrival of the French troops, starting in December, and Mountbatten's judgement and his aggressive desire to stay in touch with events.

The Netherlands East Indies

The problems for SEAC involving the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) started long before SEAC became responsible for it and continued many years after SEAC handed it over to the Dutch. The area was never a unified country under the Dutch before the war, under the Japanese during the war, or under the Allies both during and after the war. The agreement between the British and Dutch governments was already inadequate when it was signed, and the failure of the British government to clearly define SEAC's role continued to hamper SEAC until it was handed over to the Dutch. When SEAC's occupation started the Dutch forces were almost nonexistent, and those who were available were a hindrance to SEAC. Lastly, unlike the indigenous politics of Indochina, the government of the Republic was divided and unable to control the country sufficiently to offer the British a real alternative to the Dutch. Throughout this period the men of SEAC struggled to complete their mission and tried to effect a smooth transition to postwar activities.

Before the war the Dutch, although nominally controlling all of NEI for over 300 years, had never coordinated their

administration throughout the area as one unit. As such, there was no real concept of NEI as one single country. There was no single language that dominated and the culture of the region varied considerably. When the Japanese invaded in 1941 they divided NEI into three parts. Sumatra was put into the same administrative area as Malaya and controlled by the 25th Japanese Army. Java was an administrative area by itself and it was controlled by 16th Japanese Army. The rest of NEI was controlled by the South Western Navy. With three different commanders, and two different branches of the military in charge, Japanese administration was uneven and it isolated the different areas from each other.

During the war the Allies also divided the NEI. Sumatra belonged to SEAC and the rest of NEI fell under the responsibility of General MacArthur's South West Pacific Area (SWPA) command. The only part of NEI that was liberated before the Japanese surrendered was parts of Borneo, and it was the Australians who did that. During the war the Dutch set up a government in exile and located it with SWPA. They had a few liaison personnel with SEAC, but their work was very limited. NEI was not in the military path to Japan and with SWPA concerned with defeating the Japanese and not with liberating the occupied areas, it is not surprising that little attention was paid to it. SEAC also paid little attention to it as SEAC just did not have the military might to even contemplate any offensive

actions against NEI before the end of 1945. At the Potsdam conference Mountbatten was told that all of NEI would become his responsibility on 15 August. He accepted this added responsibility on the condition that he receive "adequate advance intelligence on the new territories."²¹ This information was never forwarded to him as it probably did not exist. What information the Dutch were able to gather during the war concerned Japanese troop movements and other militarily significant information, but when the war ended they had nothing on any sort of political activities. H. J. van Mook, who had been appointed Lieutenant Governor of NEI shortly after the Japanese invasion, told Mountbatten that he expected little resistance in NEI,²² and that most of it would probably come from Sumatra, and not Java, as Java had been subjected to more concrete Dutch control longer than other parts of NEI.²³

This negligence and self-delusion caused SEAC to completely misread the situation. Not only did this affect military planning, but it caused political planning to directly interfere with the necessary changes to that military planning. On 10 December, 1944 the Dutch concluded an agreement with SWPA by which the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration, NICA, would handle all civil affairs of the NEI once it was liberated. No similar

²¹ Mountbatten, Report to the Combined Chiefs, p. 181&3.

²² Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 290.

²³ Dennis, p. 77.

agreement was signed with the British government, though a verbal agreement was reached between the NEI government and SEAC. An official agreement was not signed until 24 August, 1945, and despite the fact that SEAC had already accepted responsibility for all of the NEI, it only covered Sumatra. On 4 September it was extended to cover all of NEI. This agreement was flawed to begin with: it was designed to cover the situation where NEI was liberated from the Japanese by force of arms. The British would set up a temporary military occupation and turn it over to the Dutch very quickly as the planning was for the Dutch to immediately follow the British. As it was thought that the actual British civil role would be very limited and short, van Mook would take on two responsibilities: he would be head of the NEI government and Chief Commanding Officer of the NICA. These two roles put him in direct conflict with SEAC, for as head of the NEI he represented an allied government and hence was Mountbatten's superior, and as Commander of the NICA he was Mountbatten's subordinate. This would cause a great deal of unnecessary friction as van Mook was both the superior and subordinate to all of the SEAC commanders. The continued lack of an agreement between Britain and the Netherlands that reflected the real situation in NEI would cause the members of SEAC to constantly ask for advice and clarification, and times to make the decision on the spot.

The confusion as to who was in charge, who had the authority to make political decisions, and even as to what was really going on in NEI started having a direct effect on SEAC's mission the moment the first SEAC soldier reached NEI. On 8 September a small group from the British special forces parachuted into Java. Major Greenhalgh, as head of this force, was instructed to gather information about POWs. His report barely mentioned the political activities on Java, and when it did, it dismissed them as "confused and badly disorganized."²⁴ He goes on to say that SEAC's mission of disarming the Japanese and repatriating the POWs should be a straightforward operation. Since this confirmed previous intelligence estimates, NEI continued to remain at the bottom of SEAC's priorities.

The first indications that there might be trouble occurred shortly after 15 September when the HMS Cumberland, commanded by Rear Admiral W. R. Patterson arrived at Batavia. The Control Staff responsible for gathering information and starting the repatriation of allied prisoners of war liberated a British POW, Lt Colonel Lauren van der Post. He told a very different story about the political situation. Patterson forwarded this information, coupled with Major General Yamamoto's assessment that only if the British recognized the Republic could they carry out their mission successfully.

²⁴ Wehl, p. 37-8.

Patterson ordered Yamamoto to maintain control of Java until he was properly relieved, but events during the month between the announced surrender of Japan and this order rendered it almost useless. In Sumatra and the outer islands the Japanese basically followed orders and maintained the peace, but Java was very different. Many Japanese interned themselves in camps and waited for the Allies to return them to Japan. Of these, many gave their arms to the Indonesians. This situation was more prevalent in the eastern part of Java. Command and control broke down and led to a volatile situation: it was a defeated army and its commanders did little to force the soldiers to continue performing their military duty.

SEAC knew that a Republic had been declared but all indications were that it was not a popular revolt against Dutch rule but rather more along the lines of a secondary shock wave from the Japanese surrender. Despite this lack of seriousness toward the Republic, Mountbatten instructed Patterson before he left Singapore that he was not to make use of this new government, nor was he to suppress it.²⁵ This is a very interesting set of instructions as it indicates that Mountbatten had fully accepted the idea that he would turn the NEI over to the Dutch. He even ordered leaflets dropped throughout NEI proclaiming that SEAC had come "to protect the people and

²⁵ F. S. V. Donnison, British Military Administration in the Far East, 1943-1946 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956), p. 424

maintain Law and Order until such time as the lawful Government of the Netherlands East Indies is once again functioning."²⁶ I can only surmise that there was only a very slow dawning of recognition that colonialism was dead. Mountbatten's previous encounters with Burmese nationalism, coupled with the events unfolding in Indochina, might very well have made him cautious about suppressing any sort of local revolt against former colonial rulers.

In any case, those orders were compromised almost immediately. Once the Control Staff started working to locate and repatriate former POWs they had no choice but to use the forces of the Republic. The Control Staff teams quickly found themselves both dependant upon, and helping local administrations with public services such as water, transport, and electricity. They had to use the local labor force because their numbers were small: each team had only one officer, one non-commissioned officer, one medical officer, and one medical orderly. They would employ more than 10,000 Indonesians in Java alone.²⁷ Despite how simple this solution looked, it had far-ranging political implications; this might have been on a small scale, but as turned out, they had de facto recognized the Republic, and for many of the same reasons, and on a much

²⁶ Ibid., p. 457.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 423.

bigger scale, Mountbatten and the British government would, in time, follow suit.

SEAC faced many of the same problems with the Dutch as they did with the French. Because the Netherlands had been occupied, and then militarily retaken during the war, the country was shattered. It had no substantial economic base and what military it did possess was involved fighting the Germans until the end of the war in Europe. Eleven weeks after Germany surrendered, Japan surrendered, with no Dutch troops in the Pacific theater. The problems of shipping further retarded any movement of Dutch troops to the East. Even when the Dutch had gathered sufficient men together none of them had received any training. The few forces the Dutch were able to bring together in the East were made up of former prisoners of war. These men were clearly not ready for such a task, either physically or mentally. Terms such as "trigger-happy", "neurotic", and "provocative" were regularly used in SEAC's reports. Denning, Mountbatten's political advisor, describes them as; "atrophied and dangerously neurotic and trigger happy."²⁸

There was intense hatred towards the Dutch even before they arrived. Only three days after Patterson arrived at Batavia he ordered all Dutch personnel to his ship both because he could

²⁸ Denning to FO, 27 October 1945, FO 371/46396 F9031/6398/61 as quoted in Dennis, p. 139.

not guarantee their safety, and because of his growing realization that the Dutch presence might well jeopardize SEAC's mission. On the field commanders' advice, Mountbatten ordered all Dutch troops arriving in theater to be sent to Malaya, not NEI, where the British trained them. Thus, facing a growing, and at times heavily armed, opposition SEAC could count only on its own limited number of troops to carry out the mission.

SEAC's troop problems were even greater in NEI than they were in Indochina. Of the thirty battalions that would eventually be committed, only four were British Army, the remainder being Indian troops. With over fifty million people in Java alone, SEAC never seriously contemplated occupying all of NEI, but the brunt of the burden of carrying out the mission, no matter how it was defined, would lay with the Indians. This soon became a political football with Lt General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander in Chief India, demanding the return of Indian troops as soon as possible and Mountbatten asking for more troops just to do the minimum that might possibly be acceptable. Auchinleck, and others, was particularly concerned that the Indian troops might very well be swayed by the Indonesian rhetoric and refuse to follow orders. In the end, the Indian soldiers did an excellent job, and any problems because of their use in NEI occurred in India.

There were four main players in NEI and each contributed to the overall confusion, and ultimately, to the suffering of the local inhabitants and the soldiers of SEAC. The Dutch government

was unwilling to contemplate the loss of its most important colony. Their attitude was further stiffened by results of the war at home, particularly the problems of collaboration. The Indonesian government suffered from accusations of collaboration with the Japanese, lack of organization, and lack of control in many parts of the area. The British government had many pressing problems and did not want to spend much time on the issue. Their attitude was "let's wait and see, it will work its way out on its own." Finally, the military men of SEAC had a mission to accomplish and were going to accomplish it as best as they could. Almost all decisions they made, no matter how strictly military they seemed, always had political overtones and implications. Their failure to realize this often contributed to the friction between the other parties.

For the Dutch, NEI was their most important colony, almost identical to India for Britain. To lose it would, in effect, mean the end of their empire. Given the massive turmoil that the war had created in Europe over the past four years, the Dutch were just not mentally prepared for such a change, and the resulting lowering of their international status. The British were in a different position. They could afford to give Burma independence as the British had militarily liberated it and so granted Burma independence from a position of strength. Britain's good military record during the war gave it the prestige necessary to be able to offer independence to its other colonies without suffering from a

diminished self esteem. The Dutch had no similar record. If they were to give independence to Indonesia they would be forced to do so from a position of weakness.

The Dutch had a major problem at home with collaborators. At one point they had over 80,000 waiting trial.²⁹ Although the government was eager to put the war behind them, they also strongly wanted to see justice carried out. Where this had a direct impact in NEI was with Sukarno and Hatta. Both had been part of the Japanese administration and were considered some of the worst pro-Japanese collaborators. Given the feelings at home, the Dutch government could not have presented to their people the prospect of negotiating with persons who had been associated with the imprisonment of over 100,000 Dutch citizens.

The government of the Republic of Indonesia was not a solid government and its lack of control hardened both the British and the Dutch. This failure on the part of the Republic should not have surprised anyone. Indonesians had never been allowed to run their country before and they had had only six weeks to organize a government before the first SEAC troops arrived. They were not only handicapped by their inexperience, but also by poor communications, lack of support from anyone, and a confused Japanese army. Although this minimal time period for

²⁹ Dennis, p. 98.

organizing was a major problem, an equally important issue was the vying for power among the many groups. It was hard for the people in charge to please anti-socialist Muslims, conservative civil servants, ex-collaborators, revolutionary youth, and communists all at once. The only unifying factor that held these groups together was the desire for independence from the hated Dutch. The government also suffered from being based almost solely in Java. The Dutch could easily question their legitimacy when only a part of one island would solidly support them.

As SEAC's time of occupation progressed there developed a strange situation where there were three governments all operating distinctly; the British military, the NICA, and the Indonesian Republic. The NICA and the Republic refused to have anything to do with each other, so it was left up to the SEAC to act as a go-between and often force issues so that basic services could be provided to the people. As the British only occupied key areas and the NICA could not go beyond the British perimeter, the Republic was in control of more of Java than anyone else. They might not have been the best government, and certainly not the most stable, but it was the only one there. When SEAC needed help outside their area there was no alternative. When they did make use of the Republic the Dutch vehemently objected, but the men on the ground made the necessary decisions.

Perhaps the biggest problem was created by the British government. The last of the United States members of SEAC left on 25 November, 1945³⁰ which left the British government as de facto in charge of SEAC. This was both necessary and unfortunate for SEAC. It was necessary because many of the major decisions were strictly political in nature, and with British troops carrying out those decisions it was best that they came from the British government. It was unfortunate because the Foreign Office had its hands full already: independence issues with India, Burma, and Malaya, coupled with the immediate need to come to grips with the new world order. They just did not have the time or the qualified personnel to really do SEAC justice. The result was a continued deferral of the issue.

SEAC realized very early on that the issues in NEI were political. Mountbatten correctly refused to do the Foreign Office's work for them and continuously asked for guidance his intended attitude was: "I am here to carry out policy, not initiate it."³¹ At a meeting on 4 September, van Mook demanded that Mountbatten issue a directive that no one take any actions that might de facto recognize the Republic. This prompted Mountbatten's first request for guidance. His political advisor, Denning, also cabled London backing up Mountbatten's request. No definite response was returned. Denning again cabled London

³⁰ Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 300.

³¹ Dennis, p. 103.

on 3 October stating; "It is only fair to him [Mountbatten] that he should receive a clear indication of the policy of His Majesty's Government ..."³² The situation in NEI worsened, so on 5 November Mountbatten cabled the Chiefs of Staff outlining the only two courses of action that seemed viable. Both involved more troops and what was needed was a decision on who it was going to be. The Chiefs of Staff emphasized to SEAC that they could not touch anyone involved with Operation Python (returning troops who had finished their now reduced tour), and they could not use anyone outside of SEAC since there was no shipping. The Chiefs of Staff understood the problem of using more Indian troops and they also understood the problems with the Dutch troops. In effect they told Mountbatten to figure out some way to solve it yourself. On 21 November Mountbatten requested, "state unequivocally what H. M. Government's policy is in the NEI, so that we who have to carry out that policy will no longer be left in any doubt as to what our instructions are."³³ On 4 March he asked the Chiefs of Staff for a "clear statement of policy immediately on the British commitment to operations in west Java."³⁴ Mountbatten's political advisor, Denning, was

³² Denning to FO, 3 October 1945, FO 371/46392 F7845/6398/61 as quoted by Dennis, p. 102.

³³ Mountbatten to COS, SEACOS 553, 21 November 1945, CAB 105/162 as quoted by Dennis, p. 162.

³⁴ Mountbatten to COS, SEACOS 660, 14 March 1946, CAB 105/163 as quoted by Dennis p. 194.

replaced by Lord Killearn in February. By mid-April he writes in his diary; "I do not think any of us here rightly know what . . . (British policy) is and I gravely doubt whether H.M.G. do either."³⁵

It can be argued that the British government's accomplishments immediately following World War II were excellent, but their handling of the NEI issue was a dismal failure. In September the Secretary of State for War, J. J. Lawson went to Singapore and met with the SEAC commanders. He told them that it was a "fundamental policy . . . not to interfere in the internal affairs of non-British territories."³⁶ This had a nice sound to it but it was virtually worthless, as no matter what SEAC did in the NEI it was interfering in one way or another. The issue of Britain's role in the NEI was first discussed on 10 October by the Defence Committee. The Chiefs of Staff urged a political solution and the Foreign refused to rule out a military one.³⁷ They concluded by deciding to ask for more information. The Foreign Office Secretary, Bevin, emphasized that the Chiefs of Staff tell Mountbatten "the manner in which he is to employ his troops."³⁸ This was an attempt to remove the issue from the

³⁵ Entry for 27 April 1946, Killearn Diaries 1946, vol 1, MECSAO, as quoted by Dennis p. 201.

³⁶ SACSEA, 286the meeting, 28 September 1945, WO 172/1785 as quoted by Dennis p. 89.

³⁷ Dennis, p. 100. Dennis gives a very clear accout of the issues.

³⁸ Minute by Bevin, 29 September 1945, FO 371/46392 F7663/6398/61 as quoted by Dennis p. 100.

Foreign Office, but without any guidance, and with the Chiefs of Staff urging a political solution, this problem would not go away.

By the end of November the NEI issue was getting front page coverage. This forced the British government to reanalyze its commitment. The Defence Committee requested a legal opinion on exactly what Britain's responsibilities were. "Under the civil Affairs agreement with the Netherlands, it was told that beyond action against the Japanese, it was required only to recognize Dutch sovereignty and to do nothing that might impede the resumption of Dutch control."³⁹ Later, this would be even more strictly interpreted in regards to liberating POWs: SEAC was charged to liberate them from the Japanese only, not from Indonesians. This meant that Britain did not have an obligation to install the Dutch against opposition by local inhabitants; the only requirement was disarming and repatriating the Japanese to Japan. For many in the government this did not sit well, as the Dutch had been a loyal ally both in Europe and the Far East. They had strongly supported all allied efforts without question, including the unlimited use of Dutch shipping. Many felt that Britain had a moral responsibility to help the Dutch in any reasonable way.

³⁹ 'Netherlands East Indies: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', 30 November 1945, DO(45)43, CAB 69/7 as quoted by Dennis p. 148.

The British government's non-decisiveness on this issue played right into the hands of both the Dutch and the Republic. By not taking a stand, SEAC was forced to muddle through on what they thought was the right thing to do. Because SEAC had to leave open many possibilities, they took much longer than what was necessary. The Dutch were slowly but surely moving their men to the East. Although SEAC refused to let them disembark at Java, the Dutch knew that sooner or later SEAC would have to let them do just that. The longer SEAC stayed in Java the more troops the Dutch would have available to carry out the mission as the Dutch government saw it. As stated earlier, the Indonesian government had only six weeks to organize itself before SEAC's forces showed up. Since SEAC did not establish any sort of administration outside their key areas, and the NICA was too weak to go anywhere without SEAC protection, the longer SEAC stayed in country the better the Indonesian government could organize the countryside and itself, and prepare for the Dutch.

The last of the major players were the men of SEAC, clearly the men in the middle. For purposes of this paper SEAC actually had three main players; Mountbatten, Lt. Gen. Christison, and all the soldiers in the field. Each suffered from the problems mentioned above, and each attempted to complete his mission as best he could. With little guidance from London, and what did come was confusing, and with the Dutch and the Republic's

positions mutually exclusive, they were forced to make many decisions that were political, unpopular, and necessary. They were military men who had performed well under combat, but were political neophytes. Probably the only saving grace for SEAC was that by the end of the war, those who had demonstrated that they could perform well had risen to the top. Mountbatten had a first rate pool of men to choose from, and if it had not been for this, the situation would have been very much worse for all involved.

As commander of SEAC, Mountbatten was the interface not only between his command and London, but also between the NEI government and SEAC. With all the problems and confusion he could certainly have been the man that everyone pointed the blame at. That did not happen because Mountbatten took the lead and tried to actively control the situation, as opposed to passively accepting one disaster after the next. He, probably more than anyone else, understood that the world had changed and that a new set of rules were coming into effect.

As stated earlier, once the facts started coming in, Mountbatten realized that the NEI was every bit as much a political issue as it was a military one. He was then caught in the middle between the NEI and his mission. For the most part, he used his own judgement in deciding what needed to be done, including deciding which directives from higher were irrelevant. His most important contribution was in recognizing that the only

way SEAC could accomplish its mission without completely siding with the Dutch or the Republic was to force them to negotiate. This was much harder than what might initially appear to be the case, as not only did he have to convince the Dutch who were with him in the East, but he also had to make the Dutch government in Europe understand that this was the only way. The Dutch government's first reaction on hearing that one of their representatives was going to hold talks with the Republic was "if in fact Van der Plas had negotiated with Sukarno, he should be tried for treason!"⁴⁰ The Indonesians were not any more receptive. After three hundred years of domination by the Dutch they were in no mood to negotiate away the independence they felt they already had. Additionally, if the government started losing the support of the people, the extremists were right there trying to capitalize on anything they could. Mountbatten's use of the military was tempered by both of these positions. He used it against extremists at the end of December and thereby aided the Republic. He also made it quite clear to the Dutch that the British were not going to subdue the entire island and that once the military mission was completed the British were pulling out. SEAC's troops could not be counted on if the Dutch got themselves into trouble. He was also very supportive of his subordinate commanders' request of keeping the Dutch troops

⁴⁰ Mountbatten to Christison, 13 October 1945, C49, BA, as quoted by Dennis, p. 118.

out of Java. These two measures finally brought pressure to bear on both sides and talks were finally held. This was a major accomplishment, especially when it is considered that the Indonesians viewed the British as a colonial power helping another colonial power reassert its dominion. His success can be measured by the fact that both sides wanted a British representative at the table when negotiations started.

The second major component to SEAC in the NEI was Lt. Gen. Sir Philip Christison who was the Commander, Allied Forces, Netherlands East Indies, AFNEI. He had been in charge of the battle for Arakan on the Burma coast where he had done an excellent job. He was a soldier's soldier. This training and expertise, however, was of little use to him in his new position. He did not have any apparent political skills, nor did he have a sensitive touch in his choice of words. He did possess a great deal of common sense for solving problems and was fully prepared to use his own judgement to ensure mission accomplishment.

Christison had been Commander, AFNEI for less than two days when the first major controversy arose. He was quoted, during a press briefing, as saying that the British would only occupy key areas of Java pending the return of Dutch control. Furthermore, he intended to initiate a roundtable discussion with

the Dutch and the Indonesians.⁴¹ The Dutch had steadfastly refused to have anything to do with the Republic fearing that it might grant de facto recognition, yet here was the commander of the force going into NEI telling the world that he considered the Republic an equal to the Dutch in legitimacy! The Dutch response was immediate and stern. Mountbatten summed up the situation:

At this stage, the situation was confused by the misquotation of certain remarks by Lieut.-General Christison which had appeared in the Press . . . (it) encouraged extremist opinion in the Indonesians, infuriated the Dutch, and led to the repudiation by the Netherlands Government of Mr. van der Plas' own helpful broadcast . . . The Governor-General of the NEI had resigned his post in protest against the proposal to grant concession to the Indonesians.⁴²

Christison was supposed to take advice from the NICA but he avoided the Dutch because he felt that they were not reliable and out of touch with the situation. By a combination of Christison's refusal to even keep the NICA informed, their own ineptitude, and the bitter hatred of them by the Indonesians, the NICA failed completely to take over any administration in Java. Christison realized that something had to be done so he

⁴¹ There appears to be several accounts of exactly what Christison said. In the end it really does not make any difference what he said; the damage was done immediately.

⁴² Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 290.

dismissed the NICA and set up the Allied Military Administration Civil Affairs.⁴³ This was basically a Dutch operation, but it was commanded by the British, and used Indonesians outside the areas that the British controlled. It was effective. Christison was not interested in the niceties of diplomacy: he just wanted to accomplish his mission.

Christison also followed Mountbatten's concept of forcing both sides to cooperate. It was Christison who first objected to landing any more Dutch on Java. They were provocative and hampered his mission. They also provided the Dutch with some power to affect events independently of the British. Against the extremists in Indonesia he authorized air strikes on several occasions. Mountbatten put a stop to them eventually, but Christison was not about to risk his troops unnecessarily. At the same time he employed units of the Tentara Keamanan Rakyat, the Indonesian army, to help escort former POWs and internees. He must have fully known the sort of reaction the Dutch would give, but at the time there was no other workable solution.

At the beginning of December Mountbatten, and everyone else in SEAC, started to see some benefit from their work as the Dutch and the Indonesians had started talking. On 9 December Christison gave an "off the record" briefing to the press. The BBC interpreted his remarks to mean that the long term aim of

⁴³ Donnison, p. 429.

the British in the NEI was to restore Dutch rule. Sjahrir, representing the Indonesians at the talks, strongly denounced the British and then broke off the talks. Mountbatten was furious with Christison:

If you had carried out my instructions and refrained from entering the political arena, none of this would have happened . . . I must once more make my orders quite clear to you that you are not, at any time, to get involved in discussions concerning H. M. G. policy . . . this will enable you to concentrate on your military tasks without repeatedly having to answer charges from London.⁴⁴

Christison's continual straightforward approach ruffled too many feathers, the Dutch especially. When the British pushed to have several of the senior members of the NEI government replaced because of their lack of cooperation, the Dutch pushed to have Christison replaced. As he had caused both SEAC and the British government considerable irritation at times with both his remarks and his decisions, the British were willing to make a trade. One final comment on Christison: despite all his comments, and all the verbal abuse he received, he never once stopped the communication flow between himself and the Dutch and the Indonesians.

Finally, for the men on ground, not only did they have to contend with the confusion coming from above, but they had

⁴⁴ DO(45), 15th Meeting, 7 December 1945, CAB 69/7 as quoted by Dennis, p. 157.

their own problems as well. They had armed resistance from civilians as in Indochina, but they also had other, more organized opponents. "The armed Indonesians fell broadly into three categories: first, and militarily most the most effective, was the Tentara Repoeblik Indonesia, the 'regular Army of the Republic', organized into a number of 'divisions', armed with Japanese weapons, and to some extent uniformed. Second, came the People's Army (including Youth Movements) with varied assortments of modern and traditional arms; and third, a few terrorist secret societies . . . which were in some cases as well armed as the T.R.I." ⁴⁵

When it became obvious that SEAC did not have enough men to accomplish their mission, they changed the priorities. They could not count on Dutch troops because there were few of them and the presence of those troops usually incited the Indonesians into greater violence. SEAC's troops avoided the Dutch for fear that the Indonesians would start associating the British with the Dutch and direct violence against them as well. Aside from the political problems of employing Indonesians to help with the recovery, what support was given was local in nature and not consistent. That left only the Japanese. This arrangement worked reasonably well in some areas, especially in

⁴⁵ Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 290.

Sumatra. However, even with the Japanese, the safety of the former POWs was not guaranteed.

The inability to quickly and safely evacuate the POWs became a major problem for SEAC and the British government. As long as the POWs were in areas controlled by the Republic, both the Dutch and the Republic could put pressure on Britain: the Dutch could claim that Britain was not doing enough to help the Dutch and the Republic could use them as political hostages. This put even more pressure on the troops to complete their mission quickly and fully.

Rather than give a long list of all the individual fights that went on in the NEI, I will look at just two representative incidents: Surabaya and Bekasi. Both these events made front page news and have been discussed and analyzed by others, but I want to examine them from the troops' point of view.

Shortly after landing at Surabaya there was a major battle between the British and the Indonesians. This battle was the biggest of SEAC's occupation of the NEI and was fought along basically standard military lines. What is pertinent to my discussion is what happened when the British first landed.

Surabaya was the third area that SEAC troops occupied. It was important both for its geographic location on the east side of Java as well as for its excellent port. It was also important as a number of internee camps were in the area. The occupation started on 25 October. There was little initial resistance, but by

the end of the first day the Indonesians started erecting roadblocks and generally harassing the British. The commander realized he was in a bad situation. He had only two battalions on land with the prospect of getting only one more anytime soon. He had two choices: either he stuck it out and prepared to fight anyone that might interfere with his mission or he could try to negotiate with the local administration. The choices were clear but would mean breaking the rules no matter which was selected.

If he decided to stick it out he might very well be risking every soldier in his command. The size and power of the force against him was unknown, but he had no backup if things went sour. Additionally, if he really aggravated the local population he would not be able to locate and evacuate the POWs and internees and so he would completely fail in his mission. The alternative was just as daunting. To negotiate with the local government would immediately recognize it as legitimate. This amounted to a major political decision that he was not authorized to make and might get him relieved of his command if his superiors did not back him. He also had no way of knowing ahead of time what, if any, concessions he might have to make. However, if the negotiations went well, he and his troops should be able to complete their mission, and the local population might even assist.

Brigadier A.W.W. Mallaby, the commander, decided to act first and ask permission from higher later. The next day he sent his Chief of Staff to negotiate a modus operandi with the Indonesians. In return for being allowed to concentrate and evacuate the POWs and internees, Mallaby allowed the local government complete control of the area, including using its police force to maintain law and order. Needless to say, the Dutch were outraged by this agreement as Mallaby had given full recognition to this indigenous government. SEAC's reaction is not known because, on the following day, chance entered into the picture. SEAC had been dropping leaflets throughout Java explaining the aims of the SEAC operation and instructing the Indonesians to obey the British military authorities. Those leaflets told them to surrender all arms under penalty of death and that the British military had replaced the local government. The Indonesians felt that they had been tricked and the violence started almost immediately. Mallaby was killed trying to calm the crowds.

The second incident happened at Bekasi. It is a rather ugly affair, but demonstrates what happens when frustrated soldiers get pushed too far by civilian violence. It started when an aircraft crashed between Bandung and Batavia. The crewmen were tortured and murdered by a secret society call the Black Buffalos. This was too much for the soldiers. They had been harassed and sniped at constantly for several months without

any way for them to retaliate. The feelings were particularly stirred on this occasion as when the search party arrived at the hamlet of Bekasi and found their comrades dismembered and thrown in the canals. The perpetrators of this incident had fled by the time the soldiers had arrived. In response to this atrocity, higher headquarters ordered the village burned to the ground. It was felt that by destroying the village it would discourage any more of this sort of activities. It should be noted that even though the village was destroyed, there was no civilian casualties.

The burning took place on 13 December and on 18 December Mountbatten received a cable from London asking what was going on. This was yet another occasion where the press could send information much faster than the military. In response to this incident Mountbatten issued a policy directive:

. . .although all measures must be taken to ensure the security of our forces, and although reprisals would no doubt take place as a spontaneous result of understandable reactions to gross cases of brutality and murder, retaliation must not be taken in cold blood and as a matter of principle.⁴⁶

Conclusion. The issues in this chapter all center around the conflict of the military trying to perform the military mission of ending the war and getting directly involved with political

⁴⁶ Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 295.

problems. No one had any idea that the politics would so dominate Indochina and Indonesia and realistically no one should be faulted for this lack of foresight. However, once the problems started to manifest themselves both the military and the politicians fell far short of the mark. The military realized rather quickly that the original mission would have to be modified. They had shown up with no information about the areas they were supposed to control, and as information started arriving they started making changes. Unfortunately they did not keep the politicians fully and immediately informed. Even if they had it is doubtful that the politicians would have responded any sooner or better, but the military understood the political nature of their mission and should have done everything they could to let the politicians make the political decisions. The military further hampered their efforts by not having a clear chain of command/responsibility. Both with Gracey in Indochina and Christison in Indonesia, it was not clear who was ultimately in charge and how much the political advice from the foreign countries should count. All of this was further aggravated by the lack of power by the French and the Dutch in the Far East. The deciding issue was: Who was supposed to replace the British when their military mission was complete? If law and order is established by the military it must be turned over to someone. The vacillation on this point probably caused more confusion than any other. Lastly, Mountbatten's aggressive attitude of staying

on top of the issues and being flexible to the changing circumstances prevented a full scale blood bath.

CONCLUSION

The problem of law and order is probably as old as civilization itself. I contend that law and order is primarily a police, and not a military, function. In this section I will examine why this distinction is necessary and what the military should do when it is given this mission.

I begin by asking: why is there a distinction between the police and military? Most persons look at the two as being very similar, in fact in many countries one is a subset of the other. Recent history, such as the "Police Action" in Korea, paramilitary anti-terrorist organizations, and status of the national guard in many Latin American countries, further confuses the issue. By clearly defining each organization we can see how law and order is a military mission of last resort and what types of limitations it has.

The police and the military have much in common. Both wear uniforms, carry weapons, and have a well-developed hierarchy based on rank. In fact the two often follow exactly the same rank structure. Both are highly regimented. In parades they march in the same fashion. Both stress physical fitness. Politicians praise and blame them using the same vocabulary. The best and the bravest in both these organizations receive medals from politicians in publicized events .

There are also differences between them. Soldiers do not normally patrol streets, while this is exactly what we expect policemen to do. Soldiers use all sorts of high-powered weapons that police do not use, or if used, only very seldom and only by special units. Police forces function within a clearly-defined known area whereas an army, while at war, might go through an entire country and beyond. A policeman's job is a regular job with regular hours. A soldier, while at war, is on the "job" twenty-four hours a day. A corollary to this last difference is how the two professions recruit new members. During wartime, soldiers are coerced, forced, or volunteer, but always with the notion that it is only for the duration of the war. Policemen are recruited and screened, and usually accept the post for life.

The biggest difference between the police and the army is their purpose. The role of an army has been widely debated for centuries. Much of this debate was caused by the changing nature of the state and the ways, and reasons, it employed its armed forces. It was not until the American Civil War that total warfare developed.¹ Afterwards, war involved the entire nation, not just the army. The army's purpose was defined as the destruction or subjugation of the other army. It was no longer

¹ It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the evolution of the modern state or the concurrent development of modern warfare. For an excellent analysis of the changing role of the army, see Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1977).

trying to gain ground or subdue inhabitants in captured territory, though these might well happen as a result of its primary purpose. All efforts are directed towards defeating the opposing army, and "the most certain and probably the most rapid route to victory lay through the destruction of the enemy's armed forces."² With this understood, all soldiers are trained to meet and destroy the enemy. They train to do this as efficiently and effectively as possible. They train to kill.

Soldiers are issued orders that they are expected to follow; they do not enforce governmental laws. These orders are quite different from laws in that they are quite simple, in effect for a limited amount of time, and their legitimacy derives from the command structure, not from a political process. They need to be simple because everything and everyone is divided into friends and enemies. Almost nothing is neutral during war.

Policemen, on the other hand, have a different purpose. It is their job to enforce the laws passed by the government. They do this by maintaining order using the minimum violence necessary and turning the criminals (notice, they are not called "the enemy") over to the court system. Sometimes policemen die in the course of their duty, but this is by far the exception.

Under normal circumstances there is no overlap of duties between the police and the army. Each has its own area of

² Ibid., p. 313.

responsibility that is distinct from the other. However, under unusual situations the line separating the two disappears. This is caused by an inadequacy on the part of the police force: either the opposing force is more than the police can handle, or the police are unreliable, or the police are nonexistent. Such was the case in Southeast Asia immediately after the Japanese surrender. As Mountbatten described it in his official report; "through out this vast area there existed no reliable civil police."³ The Japanese had ruled with military might and martial law. With their surrender, there was an immediate vacuum. There were no effective police forces available to establish or maintain the law and order. Additionally, with no government, whose law and order would such a police force enforce? Only the military was available to accomplish this task.

It is my contention that the military ought not to be used to establish or maintain law and order; however, at times there is no alternative. When such a situation occurs, there must be very strict controls placed on the military. The guidance must be extremely clear and definite. The goals of such a mission must be unequivocally stated, including the estimated time that the military will probably be required to conduct this operation and who will relieve them. Obviously not every possible problem can be foreseen, therefore, the intent of the operation must be clearly

³ Mountbatten, Post-Surrender Tasks, p. 282.

spelled out and understood by everyone-even down to the lowest private. In addition, the politicians who authorize the use of the military in this manner must be prepared for the political fallout such use of force might entail. Again, soldiers are trained to kill, not apprehend criminals. When they are put in another environment, sometimes their training is hard to adjust. For the most part, the soldiers of SEAC did a good job, though there were some excesses that were clearly the result of soldiers reacting as soldiers in a non-combat situation.

The problems presented in this paper concerned the two areas that caused considerable difficulty for SEAC. In most of the rest of Southeast Asia the soldiers of SEAC saw little action. I chose French Indochina and the Netherlands East Indies because they highlighted the issues involving using the military as a police force. If everything goes without opposition there is seldom a need for the military in the first place, so I found it instructive to study the areas where things went wrong. I draw the following conclusion:

1. To use the military to maintain law and order is a political decision. It must be closely watched by the government and that government must be ready to address unforeseen problems quickly and consistently. Britain's failure to establish and maintain a coherent policy forced Mountbatten and the SEAC commander to establish it for them. Part of the blame can be attributed to the Foreign Office for not keeping a close eye on the

events in Southeast Asia and part can be attributed to SEAC not keeping the information flowing at full speed.

2. Before the military is committed on such a mission it should be made clear who will relieve them and when will they be relieved. The SEAC troops were sent in with a foggy notion that they would turn the countries over to the former colonial power. This position was in flux throughout most of the occupation and caused needless suffering to all parties concerned.

3. The maximum amount of military force that will be allowed must be stated before operations begin. To first allow airstrikes and then to prohibit them, to have no policy on the destruction of enemy held villages and then to establish one afterwards, to have commanders threatening to use full military might and then not knowing how far they can really go is not conducive to mission accomplishment.

Lastly, it is understood that no matter how much planning goes into an operation there will be unforeseen problems. My conclusions above are meant to allow commanders out of communication with higher headquarters to make intelligent decisions on their own. The longer the mission of law and order lasts the more likely that the constraints imposed on the soldiers will change, but they should at least begin with some idea of what they are supposed to do and how they are supposed to do it. It was unfortunate that SEAC did not start out with these

ideas fully defined, but they had very good men from top to bottom that allowed them to finally complete their mission

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